The Gap Is the Story

On Building Characters Who Don't Know Themselves

A craft essay

There is a standard document in fiction development called a character bible. It tells you who a character is. Their background, their wound, their want. Their relationship to the protagonist. The colour of their bedroom walls if you're thorough.

These documents are descriptive. They answer the question: *what is this person like?*

That is not the question I've come to think matters most.

The question that matters is: *what is this person allowed to do in prose?*

The Problem With Description

A well-described character and a well-written character are not the same thing. You can know everything about a person — their psychology, their history, the precise shape of their self-deception — and still produce flat, explanatory prose when you sit down to write them. The description lives in a document. The character lives in sentences. The gap between those two things is where most fiction fails.

The conventional solution is to trust your instincts. Know the character deeply enough and the voice will come. This works for some writers and some characters. It works much less reliably when the character's core condition is *not knowing themselves* — when the dramatic power of the story depends on the reader understanding something the POV character cannot.

This is a specific and common problem in literary fiction. It is the engine of Ishiguro's work, of Murata's, of Tolstoy's Anna. The character's inability to see themselves clearly is not a flaw in their characterisation. It is the point. And it is extraordinarily easy to write badly.

The most common failure is the moment of accidental self-comprehension: the character who suddenly, in a moment of stress, understands themselves with a precision they have never demonstrated before. The prose does this because the writer understands the character and the understanding leaks. The reader gets the explanation they didn't need. The engine stops.

Operational Documents

Over the course of developing a novel, I arrived at a different kind of character document. Not

descriptive. Operational.

An operational character document does not tell you what a character is like. It tells you what the prose is allowed to do when it is inside this character's perspective. The two are not the same.

For a character whose core condition is observing the world with precision while remaining opaque to himself, the document does not say: *he is perceptive but self-unaware.* That is a description. It tells you nothing about the sentence in front of you.

The document says instead: *the narration names what he notices. It does not name what it means. He will register something. He will file it. He will not understand the file.* These are constraints. They govern the prose at the line level. Every sentence written from inside this character's perspective is tested against them.

The difference in output is significant. With a description, the writer decides scene by scene how much self-awareness to allow. Drift is constant and cumulative. With operational constraints, the character's condition is architecturally enforced. The character cannot accidentally understand themselves because the prose is not permitted to perform that understanding.

Behavioral Mechanics

The operational document contains what I call behavioral mechanics: specific rules for how a character acts in particular conditions, with enough precision that the same action would be written the same way by any writer working from the document.

These are not personality traits. Saying a character is *reserved* is a trait. It tells you something broad but produces inconsistent prose. A behavioral mechanic is: *in group conversation, his contribution arrives after the room has moved on. He speaks anyway. The conversation either catches it or doesn't. He has not noticed that his timing is unusual.* That is a prose constraint. It tells you exactly what to write and, crucially, what not to write.

The mechanics govern: how the character speaks under pressure, how they behave when they want something and won't say so, what they do in silence, how their body moves when they are not managing their body. Each mechanic is specific enough to produce a particular sentence and general enough to govern an entire novel.

The critical discipline is that the mechanics must be consistent with each other and must never override the character's core condition. A character whose core condition is self-opacity cannot have a behavioral mechanic that produces self-awareness, not even situationally, not even under extreme pressure — unless that exception is itself specified in the document as a named deviation with defined conditions.

That exception, when it exists, is one of the most powerful structural tools available. A character who observes themselves with zero comprehension in every scene becomes comprehensible to

themselves once, under conditions the reader has been watching build for two volumes. The drift rule is overridden once. The reader has been ahead of the character for two hundred pages. For one arc, they are level. The emotional weight of that levelling is extraordinary precisely because of everything that preceded it.

The Reader Gap

The central concept underlying all of this is what I've come to call the reader gap: the deliberate, engineered distance between what the POV character understands about themselves and what the reader understands about them.

This gap is not a side effect of good characterisation. It is the story's engine. It must be designed, not hoped for.

Most craft advice addresses characterisation from the character's side: know your character, develop empathy for them, understand their interiority. This advice is correct but incomplete. It produces a writer who understands the character deeply and prose that reflects that understanding — which collapses the gap from the wrong direction. The reader ends up where the writer is. The reader is never ahead.

The reader gap requires engineering from the reader's side. The question is not: *what does this character know about themselves?* The question is: *what will the reader understand that the character does not, and when?*

Working from this question produces different documents. You are not describing a person. You are designing an asymmetry. You know, precisely, what the reader will see that the character cannot. Every scene is tested against that asymmetry. Does the gap hold? Has the prose accidentally closed it?

The test at the end of every scene: does the POV character understand themselves more fully now than the reader does? If yes, the scene has failed. The reader must always end further into the character than the character is. The gap is the engine. The engine must keep running.

Structural Absence

One of the specific techniques that emerged from this approach is what I'd call structural absence: the use of what a character *cannot do* in prose as the primary source of their dramatic power.

In the novel I've been developing, there is a central figure who never narrates. He appears in every volume. He is present in some of the most significant scenes. Other characters are shaped

profoundly by his presence. But he has no interiority in the prose. He is observed. He does not observe.

This is not a stylistic choice made for variety. It is a structural rule with a specific consequence: this character becomes the most unknowable person in the story precisely because he is never permitted to explain himself. The reader learns more about him from what he doesn't say than they would from being inside his head. His interiority is legible only through one physical register — what his hands do. That constraint is absolute. It never breaks.

The moment it broke, his power would collapse. He would become knowable. The dramatic irony running through every scene he appears in — the irony that both POV characters fail to fully read him, in different ways, for different reasons — would vanish. The structural absence is what makes him matter.

This is a different way of thinking about character power than the conventional model. Conventional development asks: *what does this character feel and how do we convey it?* Structural absence asks: *what must this character be prevented from conveying, and why does that prevention make them more present?*

Character-Specific Prose Constraints

The final element of the methodology is the most unusual: prose mechanics that differ depending on whose perspective the scene inhabits.

This is different from voice. Voice differences between POV characters are standard and well-documented — this character uses long sentences, this one uses fragments, this one favours certain registers. What I'm describing goes deeper. The narrator's own behaviour — what it is and is not permitted to observe, how it handles the gap between action and meaning, what it does with silence — changes based on the character whose perspective it is inhabiting.

For a character whose condition is self-opacity: the narrator observes what he notices and does not editorialize. It does not translate his actions into meaning. It trusts the reader to carry the translation.

For a character whose condition is armoured control: the narrator has access to a precise internal vocabulary she uses to categorise her experience. The reader can see that the vocabulary is accurate in every domain except one — the domain she is managing most carefully. The narrator does not point this out. It is visible in the categories she reaches for and the category that is conspicuously absent.

These are not the same narrator applying different tones. They are different operating rules, applied at the sentence level, producing prose that feels formally distinct without announcing itself as such.

The reader experiences this as the difference between characters who feel genuinely different to inhabit. The mechanism producing that difference is architectural.

What This Is Not

This is not a system for writing characters who are cold or withholding. The methodology is not about distance.

The most common misapplication of constraint-based character work is producing characters who feel clinical — precise but empty. This happens when the constraints govern *expression* without governing *depth*. A character who is not permitted to name their feelings is not a character who does not have them. The operational document must specify what the feelings are, how deep they run, and exactly which physical and behavioral registers carry them — precisely because those registers are the only access the reader has.

The constraint is not: *this character does not feel much.* The constraint is: *this character feels deeply and the prose must carry all of that depth through channels other than direct naming.* The second constraint is harder to write. It produces better fiction.

A Note on Process

These documents did not exist at the beginning of the project. They emerged from the work. A scene would go wrong in a specific way — the character would suddenly understand themselves too clearly, or the reader gap would collapse, or the wrong register would leak in — and the failure would identify a rule that hadn't been written yet. The operational document is, in this sense, a record of every mistake the prose has already learned not to make.

This is the key practical distinction from a standard character bible written before drafting begins. The conventional bible describes who the character will be. The operational document describes how the prose has learned to behave around them. It is built from failure, not projection. It is corrective in origin and generative in application.

The result is a document that can be handed to another writer — or to another version of yourself a year from now — and produce prose that is recognisably the same character. Not because it describes the character well, but because it constrains the prose precisely.

That is the goal. Not description. Constraint. Not who they are. What the prose is permitted to do.

The gap between those two things is where the story lives.

The author is currently developing the novel One Open Sky *(「ひとつの晴れ間」), from which the examples in this essay are drawn.*

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